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ABSTRACT

To determine whether program evaluation will be an important tool for policymaking and management in the Reagan Administration, it would be helpful to consider what the Reagan administration expected and received from evaluation in California during the period 1971-1974. In California, program evaluation activities were frequently implemented on a decentralized, intergovernmental basis, parallel to the President's current policy on "Federalism." As in California, cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit evaluations will probably be stressed and encouraged. California evaluation policies emphasized decision-based evaluations and attention to identifying the evaluation information needs of different user groups; this emphasis will probably be duplicated in current Federal evaluation policy. As it was in California, agency heads will have significant discretion in deciding which evaluation functions are most conducive to achieving effective policy implementation. In this atmosphere, professional evaluators will have to convince state and local officials that their work can and does meet their decision-making needs. (BW)

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PROGRAM EVALUATION AND THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION:

THE CALIFORNIA EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

It is entirely appropriate to question whether program evaluation will be an important tool for policymaking and management in the Reagan Administration. But before one can attempt to answer this question it might be helpful to consider what the Reagan administration expected and received from those evaluative efforts it supported or experienced in California during the period 1971-74.

Since "program evaluation" is too broad a concept to discuss in generalities, my remarks will be directed toward issues and practices in three basic categories:

--Evaluation policy,

--Management of evaluation functions, and

--Capacity-building for doing and using evaluation.

After presenting a brief overview of evaluation activities during the Reagan years in California, I will share with you my impressions of whether and how these earlier experiences suggest any clues as to what is in store for program evaluation in this Administration. Of course, none of my comments should be construed as representing any position or expressed view of the U.S. General Accounting Office.

Since more of my experience with program evaluation in California was in the crime and delinqeuncy prevention and criminal justice area than in other areas (such as transportation, health care, etc.); illustrative examples will be drawn from this policy area.

POLICY

Although no formal declaration of State governmentwide policy for program evaluation efforts eminated from the Governor's Office, each executive agency was expected to employ appropriate and effective management practices to assure implementation of Administration policies. I would envision a similar arrangement would hold true during the Reagan Presidency concerning the various Departments.

Scope

In the last 2 years of the gubenatorial administration, there was an effort to expand the scope of program evaluation efforts horizontally across State departments and agencies in order to examine the cross-program impacts and side-effects being experienced in different policy and program areas.

This administration would appear to have need of evaluation activities of similar horizontal scope to assist the "cabinet councils" in formulating administration policy; since each cabinet council is dealing with different policy clusters and many related programs simultaneously.

Also, in California during the early 1970s program evaluation activities were frequently implemented on a decentralized, intergovernmental basis. State agencies typically were involved in outcome evaluation studies, impact assessment, and data base development activities, while counties, cities, and multiple governmental planning entities focused on process evaluations, management analysis, and various monitoring efforts. In some instances, full blown formative evaluation

studies were also undertaken at both levels of government, but these tended to be fewer in number and tied to specific research/action-demonstration efforts involving Federal grants. Hence, in California's evaluation activities during the early 1970s we may perceive a parallel to the President's policy on "Federalism"--decentralization or "devolution" of social program decisionmaking responsibilities to States and local governments through consolidated block grants. In fact, future program evaluation responsibilities and policy expectations should also tend to reflect a similar depth or vertical movement of program evaluation down to State and local policymakers and decisionmakers to accompany the shift in program direction and responsibility. Consequently, there should be less structure and a reduced volume of evaluative activities occurring at the Federal agency level.

Another indicator of the potential direction of Federal program evaluation policy may be reflected in the division of labor in California's early efforts to evaluate clusters of like projects (10 to 15 projects per cluster) in criminal justice around 1972 and more sophisticated program-level evaluations. The cluster evaluations were of two types. One involved regional groupings of counties who pooled their evaluation resources to evaluate those projects which were being implemented in their jurisdictions. The second type involved the State Planning Agency, contract evaluators, and selected counties and cities involved in the projects being evaluated. Although there were difficult problems to be overcome and mixed benefits from these early

cluster evaluations, the die was cast for program evaluation activities that were purposely planned, designed, and implemented as intergovernmental efforts. In program level evaluations of "diversion" and "community-based corrections" programs, the division of labor between State and local units of government became even more evident. The State agencies provided a design framework, offered technical assistance, and helped establish common definitions for assuring comparibility of data to assess relative effectiveness among and between various program intervention strategies which were aimed at achieving similar program outcomes (e.g., reduce criminal recidivism).

I would suspect that to the degree that program evaluations are still considered important tools for policy formulation and decisionmaking, such efforts will be encouraged by this Administation bút with fewer mandates on State and local governments regarding methods or arbitrary reporting requirements. Where it would make sense for a combined Federal, State, and local evaluation effort, such arrangements would probably be made at the departmental level rather in OMB or the White House.

In the earlier California period there were some efforts to tie cost or budgetary data to evaluation findings in order to determine cost-effectiveness, conduct cost-benefit studies or merely make cost-comparisons between different public policies and programs. Given the cost conscious nature of this Administration and the reduction, in real dollar terms, in resources available to support public programs at the State and local level, cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit evaluations will probably be stressed and encouraged.

Meeting Users' Needs

Disenchantment with evaluation research efforts that proved to be untimely and irrelevant in meeting the policymaking and decisionmaking needs of multiple users motivated an effort to study the diffusion of evaluation information in 1972-73. Subsequent changes in State evaluation policies and evaluation planning emphasized decision-based evaluations and greater attention to identifying the evaluation information needs of different user groups. In 1974, evaluation planning activities in the criminal justice policy arena adopted a utilization-focused paradigm--USERS'-NEEDS-OBJECTIVES-DESIGN. This approach was developed to plan and design evaluation studies to meet the information feedback needs of criminal justice policymakers and decisionmakers.

Federal evaluation policy during Reagan's Presidency will probably call for evaluations which are decision-based. Cabinet Department heads responsible for policy implementation will have wide latitude in deciding what to evaluate and how, but ultimately are accountable to the President and the Congress in achieving whatever policy objectives are set. Evaluation planning probably will be agency-based and specific to those programs for which each agency is adminstratively responsible. Consequently, management decisionmaking at the Federal level will tend to employ evaluation findings that bear on those critical policy questions with which that agency is confronted.

Synthesis

Just before the change of adminstrations in California in 1975; there were several efforts aimed at achieving a rational

synthesis of evaluation research findings and construct a reference service not unlike the "DataBank on Program Evaluations" developed by Wilner at UCLA.

This is one area in which it is too early to tell whether Federal evaluation policy will address problems of synthesis and meta-analysis. Clearly, the "cabinet councils" framework and decentralization of much governmental decisionmaking to State and local government officials would warrant arguing for some Federal initiative in synthesizing and extending knowledge gained from past evaluation efforts to aid policymakers at all levels of government.

MANAGEMENT

Evaluation functions during the Reagan era in California were highly decentralized. This is a reflection of the basic philosophy that since executive department heads are accountable for success in policy implementation, they should decide how best to organize their respective evaluation functions to meet manaegment decisionmaking needs.

Recall that many evaluation activities in California were carried out on an intergovernmental basis with a division of labor which purposely kept the State evaluation bureaucracy rather small, relatively speaking, in comparison with those in other States during the early 1970s. For example, in the area of criminal justice it was a basic premise that local government officials should decide which programs and projects they would adopt and support locally. Consequently, since these officials had a greater need for evaluation information which would aid in such decisions,

evaluation activities tended to be more numerous and more intensive at the local level than at the State level. However, where the State department head believed there was a legitimate need to provide for an independent evaluation, contract evaluation work was carried out under State auspices on specific priority programs or to address policy questions on a very selective basis. As one illustration, the California Specialized Training Institute at San Luis Obispo, California provided officer survival training to local police agencies across the State as well as from other States and even foreign countries. Since this program was considered important and of interest to the chief executive and its services were Statewide in scope, the State Planning Agency carried out the planning of the evaluation study and supervised the study's implementation which was performed by a third-party contractor.

Evaluation directors, for the most part, were given considerable latitude and a reasonable level of resources to carry out those evaluation responsibilities delegated by the department heads. The same principle of delegated authority and decentralized management philosophy was evident in many of the evaluation units. If you accept the premise that a decentralized management structure can still be a viable system for organizing evaluation tasks, then the California evaluation scene was in fact a system. Also, it should be noted that the California State Legislature had a rather sophisticated audit and program review capability for its day, in the Office of the Legislative Analyst, who was at that time A. Allen Post. As the legislative branch

increased its oversight responsibilities, the cabinet departments beefed up their own evaluation staffs to conduct management studies and program evaluations recommended in order to improve management in their respective departments.

I would anticipate a similar parallel during the Reagan Presidency. OMB will probably continue its role of admonishing the heads of executive departments to improve their management activities through appropriate use of evaluation activities and information, as per OMB Circular A-117. Agency heads will have significant discretion in deciding what evaluation functions they believe are most appropriate and conducive to achieving effective policy implementation. It will then be up to them to decide how best to organize their program evaluation efforts. There probably is very little or no chance that there will be an "evaluation czar" directing Federal evaluation efforts in the Executive Office of the President.

Some oversight of Federal program evaluation activity by OMB and the Congress are very likely, but such oversight will probably test for legislative compliance and use in management decisionmaking rather than specifically directing how the executive departments should organize and carry out their respective evaluation responsibilities.

What remains to be seen is how the consolidated block grants will influence what kind and how much program evaluation is carried out at or through Federal auspices and what evaluation functions will be delegated to State and local governmental officials. Obviously, there will be fewer requirements for evaluation in

"blocked" programs placed on State and localities. However, "non-blocked" programs may retain a Federal character and warrant different levels of evaluation effort to support management decisionmaking.

On the whole, it would seem that program evaluation processes and results will become more important to State and local government officials for those programs now consolidated within block grants. Hence, under the decentralization theme of the President's policy on Federalism, it will be up to each State and cognizant local government to decide how best to organize and manage those evaluation activities they beleive will help them in making the tough program and resource allocation decisions that lay ahead. Those evaluation efforts and results which prove to be of utility in State and local policy and decisionmaking will have the best chance of continuing.

CAPACITY BUILDING

One significant concern that has been expressed is whether States and localities have the management muscle and evaluative capability to do and use program evaluation in ways that will help them to distinguish between various policy and program alternatives. Here again, with the curtailment of extensive direct Federal presence in program evaluation activities, comes the withdrawl pangs not unlike that being experienced in conjunction with Federal budget cuts in domestic programs.

Professional evaluators will find that they will have to convince State and local officials that their work can and does meet their policymaking and decsionmaking needs. Evaluation will have

to compete with other management demands in order to obtain the resources necessary to do the job. This will require redefining the evaluation consumer and devoting even more attention to illuminating and addressing their evaluation information needs.

If State and local governments are now expected to make the tough decisions on which programs in a block grant stay and which will expire, but are not suitably geared-up to plan, design, implement, and use evaluation processes and information, shouldn't the Federal Government help them develop the necessary evaluation capability? I believe the answer should be yes. But the next logical questions are what kinds of assistance are needed; what can the Federal Government provide; and who should pay for it?

Aside from those federally sponsored research and action demonstration programs that remain, there is a wealth of experience available among the Federal management cadre which could be shared with State and local people. This could take the form of technical and management assistance, training seminars and workshops; as well as federally-assisted evaluation capacity building demonstrations or models carried out in different State and local jurisdictions on some competitive basis. Successful experiences and practices for organizing to do and use evaluation could then be shared with others as part of further technical assistance and training service supported by the Federal Government.

During the Reagan years in California, this notion of shared responsibility and capacity-building was considered an appropriate role for the State; especially in light of the decentralized

policy and decisionmaking structure characteristic of that period. With the transfer of program responsibilities from Federal to State and local governments the need for evaluation technical assistance and training is recognized. Exactly how it will be provided, and who will do it remains to be determined.

Clearly the Federal Government whether it be through OMB, cabinet agencies, or the U.S. General Accounting Office, will share successful evaluation practices and information with State and local governments. But it will be up to the evaluation community to convince these State and local policymakers that evaluation is needed, useful, and can be supported out of the savings realized through improved effectiveness and elimination of ineffective publicly supported programs. Program evaluation will have to be able to pay its own way.